

# Civil Affairs team focuses on rural Djibouti; provides needed care to people, livestock

Story and Photos by Lance Cpl. Adam C. Schnell

**ALI SABIEH DISTRICT, Djibouti** – A convoy of vehicles passes over countless miles of mountainous lava rock terrain in eastern Djibouti with one mission in mind, to improve the health of the people in the region.

After two flat tires and hours of spine-jarring bumps, members of the 412<sup>th</sup> Civil Affairs Battalion made it to their destination to find several families waiting for their opportunity to receive medical attention.

Two teams from the battalion treated more than 450 people in the villages of Guistir and Assamo from Feb. 8 to 12. Also during the first Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa Medical and Veterinarian Civic Action Programs performed in the area, service members treated more than 400 area livestock.

The battalion, while in support of CJTF-HOA, conducts missions to increase stability in the region by cooperating with host villages. The teams conduct various tasks to help provide clean water, functional schools and improved medical facilities.

The sites for the MED/VETCAPs in the region are chosen for many different reasons. These were chosen because of their remote location and basic medical care is unavailable and medicines are too expensive for the people in the region.

A lot of animals were also treated to include goats, sheep, donkeys and camels. The villagers rely very heavily on these animals, without them they wouldn't survive, said Army 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Amy K. Peterson-Colwell, a Fredericktown, Ohio, native and staff veterinarian for the 412<sup>th</sup>.

The villagers need healthy animals to survive, so to be able to treat the most animals, the teams stayed in the same community for two days. Staying in the villages for more than a day provides more time to build lasting impressions with the people team members said.

The idea is to get to know the villagers on a personal level, said Sgt. 1<sup>st</sup> Class William J. Dickson, a team sergeant for the battalion. There was one herder who came back on the second day of the VETCAP after her sick donkey was treated and said it was doing much better thanks to them.

"It's a great feeling when people come back to just tell you thank you," said Dickson, a West Palm Beach, Fla., native.

Taking this approach when coming into a new village helps to build a strong foundation for relationships that will last for years. It also helps build confidence in the villagers when it comes to medicine they provide to them.

"They go home and tell their neighbors that they feel better because of the medicine," said Abdi Said Ali, a translator at the MEDCAP. "Word of mouth gets around quickly, and more people come on the second day."

During the VETCAP, a nickname was given to the staff veterinarian by local villagers for her un-

canny work with donkeys, animals similar to the horses she worked with in her civilian life. Peterson-Colwell, dubbed the "Donkey Whisperer" by villagers, was given the name because of her techniques of talking to the animals in a soft voice to calm them down.

"Many people don't understand that sometimes all the animal needs is a gentle touch or a soft word," she said.

Besides working with the animals to make them better, the members have to work with the villagers to better diagnose their animals. Peterson-Colwell said being a veterinarian is really about working with people.

"The more you attempt to learn their language and culture, the more open they are to you," said Peterson-Colwell. "The more open they are, the more they trust that you will help their animals."

Besides building lasting relationships and providing medicine to the people in the villages, the four-day long VET/MEDCAP was used as a training tool for the civic action team who arrived in Djibouti only a month ago. It helped the team become better prepared for future VET and MEDCAPs.

"There's a lot of moving parts to every MEDCAP," said Army 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Kristy R. Linginfelter, a physician's assistant for the battalion. "This was our first MEDCAP, our baby step."

The Tacoma, Wash., native said they wanted to see how everyone worked together

and integrate training into the MEDCAP. The purpose of the training is to build the confidence in medics so they can better diagnose each patient.

"I got to work one-on-one with patients from start to finish," said Seaman Brandon S. Crocker, a general corpsman with the Expeditionary Medical Unit. "I learned a lot out here because I saw things that I would never see in the states."

Across the village square, training was also a major aspect of the VETCAP. Many members of the 412<sup>th</sup> Civil Affairs Battalion were taught the ins and outs of safely handling the animals, said Dickson.

"I learned a lot about camels since being out here," said Peterson-Colwell, a veterinarian in her civilian career. "I also learned that problems herders face out here are the same that farmers have in the United

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(Top) Local villagers stand outside the gate here waiting for their turn to be seen during a Medical Civic Action program Feb. 10. The 412<sup>th</sup> Civil Affairs battalion treated more than 400 people and their animals in the four days they provided in the program. (Bottom Photo) Army Staff Sgt. Johnny A. John and Army 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Kristy R. Linginfelter, both with the 412<sup>th</sup> Civil Affairs Battalion, clean the foot of a child during a Medical Civic Action Program here Feb. 9. The Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa-funded program was held for two days in a recently renovated clinic also paid for by CJTF-HOA.